

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

Nature-based tourism is defined. This is followed by a discussion of types of tours, duration of and intervals between tours, and the people that participate in nature-based tours. The logistics involved in tour operations are itemised. Reference is made to the ethos of tours, to the education of guides and tour operators and the ethics of tour management. Environmental awareness and sensitivity, and proper business procedures are necessary pre-requisites for successful enterprises in nature-based tourism. The future of nature-based tours is discussed in terms of expeditions and the necessity for adequate preparation. The potential for Aboriginal cultural tours is also noted.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1975 I have been involved in tourism and was the first tour operator in Western Australia to run regular nature-based tours. This stemmed from a desire to combine my outdoor hobbies and interests with an occupation. Initially it was difficult to gain acceptance. In the 1970's and early 1980's there was not the appreciation of natural history in the wider community as there is now. At this time nature-based tours had not been developed and the word 'eco-tourism' had not been coined. However I saw a market for this type of activity. Other tour operators thought I was crazy taking weekend and 3-day trips to Dryandra State Forest, a diverse mixture of mallet plantation and shrub woodland in the wheatbelt, about 200 km south east of Perth (Serventy, 1970). They wondered what was to be seen apart from bush.

From initial involvement in tourism concentrating on scenic and adventure tours, I could see from passenger appreciation of my bush knowledge and a more in-depth interpretation of the natural world, that this was worth developing further and to focus on natural history. At the time it was a novel approach.

Although this account is based on my own experiences, the aim of this paper is to summarise these in some logical order so that others can benefit from my experience.

## DEFINITION

"Eco-tourism is commonly defined to involve three main dimensions: it is nature-based, environmentally educative, and sustainably managed" (Blamey, 1995). Blamey defines the eco-tourism experience as one in which "an

individual travels to a relatively undisturbed natural area that is more than 40 km from home, the primary intention being to study, admire, or appreciate the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas."

I prefer to use the words nature-based tourism, and define it as a flexible, relaxed and pleasurable experience, led by a person who knows the subject – taking tours to relatively undisturbed habitats so as to personally observe intricate relationships between plants and animals in their natural environments, in an ecologically sustainable way i.e. with minimal impact to the environment.

## BACKGROUND

From the start I developed innovative nature-based tours and rarely went to an area for more than two successive years. New destinations and variety ensured repeat bookings by clients: some have taken over 20 trips with me and one person more than 30. Our market developed from close association with natural history clubs and personal contact was maintained by inviting participants and friends to slide evenings and re-unions after each trip.

In 1978 I completed the first tour guide course conducted by the then Technical Education Division of the Education Department of Western Australia.

A unique location that interested me was The Pinnacles, now Nambung National Park, south of Cervantes. As there was no factual information readily available at the time, my wife and I researched and produced a booklet that explained these unusual pinnacle formations and contained background

information to the area (Coate & Coate, 1980).

During the 1980's the business was expanding and I developed annual expeditions with the Western Australian Naturalists' Club to the Kimberley, and special interest tours throughout Australia and overseas with the Bird Observers Club of Australia, the Western Australian Wildflower Society and other natural history groups. People were becoming much more aware of their natural surroundings and began to realise how fragile the environment is. No doubt television programmes such as Harry Butler's "In the Wild" and the burgeoning publications on flora and fauna at about this time, contributed to this upsurge of interest.

In addition, sea-based tours were developed to the Abrolhos Islands to observe sea birds and marine life. Other innovations at about this time were excursions to Coral Bay to view coral spawning and terrestrial orchid tours to the southwest of Western Australia during September and October. I also began an association with an International School in Singapore. Students came to Western Australia for eight days during January–February. This involved the organisation of outdoor adventure activities with a strong nature base – eg. canoeing down the Blackwood River, abseiling down ocean cliffs and into caves, caving at Margaret River, cycling along country roads and generally getting to know the south west of the State. Initially 20 students came. The course proved so popular, that about 120 students accompanied by teachers now sign on annually with *Coate's Wildlife Tours*, who organise additional activities such as mountain climbing in Tasmania and diving on the Great Barrier Reef.

In about 1990 I made the decision to sell the business I had established, and to become a freelance natural history tour guide, specializing in planning and leading tours and expeditions to remote and little visited areas. To this day I still take the occasional tour for my old company, *Coate's Wildlife Tours*. About 1992 I was invited to assist with the newly formed *Landscape Expeditions'* research and study programme for the Kimberley area. This was along the lines of the Naturalists Club' expeditions to the Kimberley, mentioned below. It is interesting working with groups that are committed to the environment and enjoy themselves while involved in gathering scientific data.

### NEW PHASES

While I planned and organised the logistics of the trips for the Western Australian Naturalists' Club along the Kimberley coast and arranged the charter of a suitable boat, Kevin Kenneally, a fellow Naturalists' Club member and a senior botanist with the Western Australian Herbarium (now Department of Conservation & Land Management – CALM) arranged the scientific programme. This was the beginning of a new phase and has worked extremely well; much valuable information was gathered on the areas visited. We pioneered a scheme that enabled amateurs to accompany, to participate and to assist – and most importantly – were willing to pay their way to help offset and lower the cost of scientific surveys into the remote parts of the Kimberley region. The logistics and cost of moving a government expedition into such areas is staggering, but by combining the enthusiastic support of professionals and amateurs in team research and comradeship such as

this, expenses are shared and members of the public have the chance to participate in the gathering of knowledge.

In 1992–3 *Landscape Expeditions* evolved along the lines Kevin Kenneally and I had earlier developed for the WA Naturalists' Club to the Kimberley. Since then these tours have set a high standard in nature-based tourism for the State. After each *Landscape Expedition* everyone is sent a copy of the expedition's diary and a report of the trip. This includes some scientific information and a list of achievements. However, this takes time and can be expensive; time is the more demanding. Video recordings of a trip can sometimes be made for people, but not every one likes to have a video camera pointed at them.

### TYPE OF TOURS AND DESTINATIONS

In the past, using either large or small coaches on camping or accommodated tours, I have taken adventure, botanical, ornithological, photographic, art, geological and general scenic type tours. I have also been involved with schools and young people who are unemployed, the purpose of which was to build up their self-esteem and imbue a sense of place. These days, of most interest to me are specific nature-based study tours requiring tight interpretation and assisting in scientific endeavours – eg. botanical or birdwatching to remote areas. I have been involved in and enjoy incentive tours for corporate bodies, mining executives etc. where a naturalist is required to interpret the natural history. These can be fun and are usually in comfortable accommodation from which interesting side trips are made.



Topics I endeavour to focus on are natural history and pioneer history. Type of tour depends on clientele and destination. They range from day trips, accommodated tours, backpacking and camping safaris; these latter make up the bulk of tours

For most groups, information imparted in a general way during the day is sufficient. For others with special interests, I usually take reference books to complement more in depth discussions and stimulating conversation around the campfire. It is essential for a tour operator or guide to know the area well, so that participants have a quality experience. For assessment of a special interest charter group – a briefing beforehand determines the level of material needed.

Those interested in a wide range of natural history topics are attracted to these types of tour where they will share the companionship of other enthusiasts. Our tour itinerary caters for all ages, and this varies from the teenager to those in their eighties, but predominantly middle aged. An eye is kept on older participants in case the programme proves too difficult. For utmost enjoyment small groups are preferred – the size depending on the particular interest – e.g. smaller groups for birdwatching, larger for botanical exploration. For a quality tour, ten to fourteen people is ideal and allows for a more flexible itinerary and a more detailed level of interpretation. However numbers vary with charter groups, from a single person to thirty or more, in which case additional guide/s are required.

Destinations all over Australia have included the Abrolhos Islands – Rudall River National Park – Carnarvon Range – Purnulu, i.e. Bungle Bungles – Mitchell Plateau – the Kimberley coast

– Kakadu National Park – Uluru, i.e. Ayers Rock – Flinders Ranges – rainforests of Eastern Australia – Tasmania and Christmas Island.

#### DURATION OF, AND INTERVALS BETWEEN TOURS

Nature-based tourism should be planned on not-too-tight a schedule. Ideally, duration should not be more than twelve days and should be flexible to allow time to observe individual pursuits. For extended interstate tours such as the Flinders Range or Kakadu National Park, about twenty three days is necessary to avoid back-tracking. On tours of this length it is necessary to be aware of possible stress or friction between participants and should this occur, to alleviate it quickly.

Intervals between tours depends on season – for example during winter, the concentration of work is in north Western Australia. Apart from one or two special school groups, summer is usually fairly free of tours and is a good time for consolidation and overhaul of equipment. On long-range excursions it is desirable for a driver-guide to have about four days between trips for relaxation and familiarisation of details for the following trip. This is not always possible. Spring is usually a good time to concentrate on wildflower tours, destinations are closer and intervals about two or three days. Weather-wise, autumn is the most predictable season and is a suitable time for visiting the southern coast. By allowing good breaks between tours, the tour leader has a relaxed start to the busy season in the north.

#### INVOLVEMENT OF TOUR PARTICIPANTS

Tour participant involvement is

encouraged in some form or other. This may be in the form of collecting wildflower specimens for pressing and identification, making records of birds heard or seen, or where clients get into a deeper involvement keying out plants, trapping animals, etc. They know at the end of the trip they have contributed in a positive way to a study of the environment.

Participants can become as involved as they wish. For example, quoting from the *Landscape Expedition* documentation (Kenneally and Paton, 1999) the ethos is:

- (a) Expeditions provide a 'safe' opportunity for people to travel to a remote area they might otherwise never visit.
- (b) There is an opportunity for participants to show their diverse knowledge, fresh perspectives and individual skills.
- (c) Participants can go away with the knowledge that they have assisted or worked toward preservation of threatened environments and species.
- (d) The trip provides close encounters with wildlife. People are able to see, touch and photograph native animals in their natural habitats, animals that they might never otherwise see. This generates a feeling of connectedness with nature and a desire to preserve it.
- (e) It provides people with the experience of talking around the campfire and sleeping under the stars.
- (f) Each evening before dinner there is a 'show and tell' session around the campfire. This is an opportunity for people to recount the day's activities, to share their

own personal experiences and to display any items of interest.

- (g) Fireside sessions to share historical knowledge of explorers and relate stories about the area. This background information adds richness and depth to people's feelings about the places visited and adds meaning and impact to their experience.
- (g) Community interaction is invited – possible involvement with various groups or individuals who may be encountered en route.
- (h) After each trip a reunion (an informal occasion) is arranged to recap and see participant's photographs – and to seek feedback.
- (i) On tour there is provision for periods of 'free time', to allow people to make their own observations and discoveries.

Individuals on tour have different expectations. I circulate continually, so that everyone has an opportunity to discuss their personal interests. I don't allow voluble participants to take control. If one person is constantly questioning, that's fine, but answers and comments are made relevant and audible to everyone. I avoid too much detail, unless it is on a person to person basis. Nothing is more boring than continual sprouting of knowledge – eg. scientific names or exact dates.

Discussions are always encouraged so that everyone feels that they are participating and contributing.

## PREPARATION AND INTERPRETATION

Research before every trip is essential. This includes topics such as:

- (a) Historical background: early explorers, pastoral history.
- (b) Geological background: mineral surveys, fossils, etc.
- (c) Selecting books and references on the area – e.g. flora and fauna.
- (d) Department of Land Administration (DOLA): maps, status of land, background to relevant features and place names.
- (e) Aboriginal Affairs Department: maps on Aboriginal communities in the area.
- (f) WA Museum and CALM: for any previous environmental studies
- (g) Contact land owners for permission to go on their property.
- (h) Reconnaissance trip. It is essential to visit the destination prior to conducting a tour to the area, preferably during the same season – one year before proposed trip. Potential logistical hazards and highlights are identified so that the practical side of the trip runs smoothly, leaving quality time for the group to conduct activities and enjoy the experience. A reconnaissance trip will hold good for one season only, but when not practical, additional information of the conditions should be sought, because a bushfire may have burnt out the tour area or floods could have washed away the tracks.
- (i) On overseas destinations there should be talks and slide/video shows before departure.

## LOGISTICS

1. **Number of tours per year:** For small tour companies, the limit is about 14 scheduled trips, ranging from 4 to 21

days' duration plus charters.

2. **Weather conditions, vehicle breakdown or accidents:** A contingency plan is always necessary in the likelihood of bad weather – e.g. a change of route; possible alternative accommodation for those whose who want it.
3. **Equipment:**
  - (a) 4WD vehicle/s (a small coach, e.g. 18–22 seater may be suitable for many areas) equipped with long range fuel tanks and spare parts, support vehicle and camp kitchen.
  - (b) Camping equipment such as insect proof tents, self-inflating mattresses and pillows.
  - (c) Safety – Expedition to carry a first aid kit, satellite phone, Royal Flying Doctor radio, GPS (Global Positioning System) and CB radio.
  - (d) Chemical toilet, using biodegradable chemicals.

NOTE: It is not necessary to own equipment, as tours can be operated by sub-contracting or hiring the equipment required.

4. **Advertising:** It is essential to make potential customers aware of what your tour offers. An attractively designed brochure spelling out the style of tour and destinations should be available well before the start of the new year (preferably no later than the end of November) so that prospective clients with long-term commitments can plan their year. It should be mailed to all previous passengers and advertised toward niche markets e.g. club magazines of groups with whom you have an affinity.

I have found advertising in major



newspapers expensive and of little use. Generally, feature articles by travel editors are more productive, especially if they are free of charge.

Well presented talks illustrated by slides of the destination and style of travel are good public relations and give an opportunity to mix and talk with potential customers.

Word of mouth is the best way of advertising and this is achieved by running a good operation.

5. **Vehicle & equipment maintenance:**

Most vehicle breakdowns can be avoided or fixed en route. In the case of a major holdup, arrange prompt action for assistance or another vehicle by radio or telephone.

Preventative maintenance is vital and should there be any doubts about any items or components, these should be replaced. It is expensive and inconvenient for parts to be ordered and couriered to isolated regions.

6. **Emergencies:**

In case of a medical emergency, make note of the nearest airstrip.

Royal Flying Doctor radio contact or satellite phone in case of accident, and put to use first aid skills. All tour operators need to have the appropriate first aid certificate.

7. **Licenses:** A number of licenses or permits may be required. These include: Transport Commission license, motor vehicle license (tour category – TC plates), communication license – e.g. CB radio and RFD radio, F Class driving license, CALM licenses for entering national parks, and licenses to pick up passengers in another state – e.g. Northern Territory.

8. **Insurance:** Public liability insurance is compulsory for all operators. Participants are advised to take out their own travel insurance.

9. **Tour operators supply:** tents, mattresses, all necessary camping gear, a comprehensive library, all food and refreshments, catering for special diets, cooking equipment and eating utensils. A *Checklist of Suggested Items* is usually given to participants.

**Participants supply:** sleeping bag for camping tours, items of personal clothing and footwear, a small backpack with personal water bottle, insect repellent, camera, film and above all, a sense of humour.

10. **Hygiene:** This is one of the most important aspects of any outback tour and can have serious repercussions if a high standard of cleanliness, particularly with food, is not maintained.

*For personal hygiene and cleanliness:* basins of clean water should be on hand at all times, and participants shown how to conserve water.

*Drinking water:* In remote locations, if water is collected from creeks or waterholes, drinking water must be boiled and chlorinated with appropriate tablets.

*Cups, plates and cutlery:* Participants should be given their own set of eating utensils and a wipex in a clean draw-string bag for the trip, and be responsible for the washing up of same.

Three wash-up bowls are lined up – the first containing hot soapy water, followed by two of rinsing water, the last of which should include a chlorine based disinfectant. These should be rotated and changed regularly

during the washing-up process.

*Rubbish disposal:* Unburnt rubbish, i.e. plastic and tins, should be contained and carried to the next town for disposal at a waste site. The old saying, "if you can cart it in, you can cart it out" is as relevant today as when I first heard it more than forty years ago.

*Toilets:* A tent specially set aside for the purpose, containing a bucket type toilet is the most desirable. It takes little effort to set up and maintain, and is particularly appreciated by older people and those worried about going into the bush at night. Alternatively, if space is at a premium, a small shovel and roll of toilet paper be made available and participants instructed on waste disposal.

## EDUCATION

Education and accreditation is essential for operators and their staff, if participants are to receive a quality experience. This can be achieved by attending tour courses at tertiary institutions and seeking accreditation from recognised agencies. An awareness of our State's natural history would flow from this.

Since 1988, tourism has become an accepted subject of study in tertiary institutions and is seen as a growth area for university undergraduate studies. In 1998 there were 55 programmes in 28 universities in Australia, variously in business, management, social sciences or hospitality faculties, schools or departments. In Western Australia, courses are available at Curtin, Edith Cowan, Murdoch and Notre Dame Universities (Sofield and Lee, 1998).

With the large number of courses

available, inevitably there will be differences in emphasis and standards. However there is one area of education on which I feel there should be no compromise. Tour guides need to be able to deliver reliable and factually accurate information to tour participants. Regrettably there is evidence that this is not always the case. To develop an appropriate standard of performance in the field, their training should include a period of practical experience with an accredited guide. To be effective, this aspect of their training should be assessed rigorously as part of the tertiary course, before they become employed as tour guides.

Avenues where students may gain initial experience as potential guides in nature, or culturally based tourism is to join organisations, clubs or societies that actively encourage the study of environments, nature and culture. Examples are our own Naturalists' Club, and other groups such as the Kimberley Society, Birds Australia, speleology clubs, friends of museums and other organisations of this kind. Another avenue might be a period of volunteer or work experience with authoritative bodies such as departments of conservation, forestry, geological surveys or wildlife services. A period as a guide in a zoo, botanic gardens, museum or Rottnest Island would also provide good experience. As part of tertiary courses on tourism, it is important to inculcate sound habits of gathering correct information, and the ability to impart it effectively.

This also raises issues of ethical standards required for tour operators and guides. A unit in ethics could justifiably form part of tertiary courses on tourism.

The professional body, the Eco-tourism Association of Australia representing



some 500 operators, government agencies, consultants, conservation and indigenous groups and students, hold regular conferences. The proceedings of the 1995 national conference were entitled "Eco-tourism and nature-based tourism: taking the next step" (Richins *et al.*, 1996). It contains some valuable information on a wide range of topics.

Educational institutions might give more thought to developing quality programmes to qualify indigenous people as guides and tour leaders. They have a great deal to offer in explaining and interpreting their culture, but need to be able to do this with conviction and commitment.

## ETHICS

CALM has a code of ethics, the essence of which is not to destroy or litter national or conservation parks. Operators need to set examples when on tour and our aim has been to abide by the following principles –

- (a) Small campfires to reduce the amount of wood burned.
- (b) Bottled gas to be used for cooking.
- (c) Leaving camp sites litter-free.
- (d) Biodegradable chemical toilets or pit toilets to minimise impact.
- (e) Reduce the use of disposable items.
- (f) Removal of all rubbish.
- (g) No use of detergents or soap in or adjacent to rivers, creeks or waterholes.
- (h) Keep to existing paths, roads.

## THE FUTURE

As remote localities become more

accessible, there may be a need to limit tourist numbers entering fragile environments. Numbers are expanding rapidly, often to the detriment of the surrounding countryside; in some areas limitation of visitor numbers will be inevitable, and this is being done already in Queensland's Carnarvon Gorge. Having said this, new areas of outstanding beauty and interest such as Mimby Caves, Ningbing Ranges and Deception Ranges in the Western Australian Kimberley will be opening up, and hopefully relieve pressure on other destinations.

To reduce time constraints and the impact of overland travel CALM in collaboration with the WA Tourism Commission have pioneered the "Ibis aerial highway" (Field and Shea, 1995). This involves tour participants flying between focal points of interest, where they explore the area by ground transport. This has also been done with sea transport along the Kimberley coast stopping off periodically to explore areas otherwise inaccessible by road. These types of tours are likely to be more common in the future.

The use of helicopters in remote areas to reach specific sites for particular interests such as back-packing, fishing, Aboriginal paintings, etc, will become more prevalent.

Some tour operators cater for "tag-alongs" (a convoy following a lead vehicle) and this is another mode of tour organisation. This has a higher impact on the environment, but the advantage is that in less accessible areas, a larger number of participants and a wider range of interests can be catered for in a shorter window of opportunity.

From seeing some excellent wildlife documentaries on television and/or joining a naturalist group, people now are becoming more aware and interested

in natural history. As a consequence, participants on nature-based tours expect more knowledge from the tour operator. I see those conducting tours becoming more conversant with the subject at hand, and having a far greater awareness of the environment and of the country traversed.

Credible nature-based tourism now needs younger, active people, particularly women who seem to be able to put their information across extremely well. Ideally, tour guides should have accreditation from universities or TAFE colleges that offer courses in nature-based tourism and the hospitality industries. A national accreditation system is currently being developed (Crabtree, A. pers. com.). Courses should be designed so that students receive practical experience during their training, by working with existing tour companies and operators.

## CONCLUSION

Since starting in 1975 the world has changed significantly. Although 25 years older since first starting in tourism, my focus still remains firmly fixed on nature-based tourism and I have great faith in its future. There are better vehicles, better camping equipment, better means of communication and better weather forecasting. Through television and popular literature, people are much more informed about the natural world and they understand much better the association between plants and animals and are more aware of the impact of man's activities on the environment. Consequently, participants are more knowledgeable and are more attuned to the various relationships and interactions in nature.

Nature-based tourism's broad appeal

across many spectrums is its strength and will ensure its survival. Tour operators will be better educated and participants will be better prepared when going on tour. I can see nature-based tours becoming more specific with a pre-determined theme. Cultural tourism that involves Aboriginal culture, cave painting, rock art and use of traditional food is a type of tour with great potential (eg Anon. 1999, Grimwade 2000 and Holthouse 1991). It relates well to nature-based tourism and is becoming more popular.

The continuation of nature-based tourism as distinct from eco-tourism, will depend on attracting younger members to nature-based clubs and societies such as the Gould League, field naturalists' clubs, wildflowers societies and bodies such as Birds Australia, whose purpose is to observe, to educate and to record.

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